

MEMORIES OF WAR (1915-1918) PART 1

G. LAWRENCE*

Preface

It is necessary to point out that the facts referred to in the following pages of my story happened sixty to sixty-two years ago.

At this distance of time I have had to rely largely on memory, though I have been able to refer to a few letters written home from France and a brief diary kept in the Western Egyptian Campaign. Then too, I have had the benefit of John Buchan's history of *The South African Forces in France* to check dates and to obtain official records of casualties suffered by individual regiments.

Memories are very strange; in times of stress they imprint themselves indelibly on the mind, yet often leaving out events seen later in more placid times. I can look back and picture vividly the incidents I have related.

I have memories of many wonderful comrades who fell in those hectic days and who went to their deaths with a song.

To these, I humbly dedicate my tale of experiences in three theatres of the Great War.

Geoffrey Lawrence,
Somerset Oaks,
Somerset West,
11 March, 1977.

Looking down the years I am struck by the sense of good fortune that seemed to eject me from boarding school life at St. Andrew's College to the exhilarating and free though hard open-air life on a farm in the Adelaide district.

Happy and carefree as I had been, and enjoying the company of many school friends around, I was never amongst the best in my class and had not the keenness to make a good scholar.

Ever since early boyhood I had hankered for farm life. Now at last my father, a hard-pressed civil servant, decided to place me with a cultured Boer farmer as a learner.

In a way I was lucky to be placed with a bit of a martinet and I had to get down to the very grass roots of farming in all its branches. A premium was paid by my parents to the farmer and in return I was treated as one of the family. However, I had to do all the menial tasks of a farm labourer and work hours were from early dawn to dusk. One of my tasks was to ring the farm bell calling the labourers before the morning star waned.

It did me a lot of good to roam with a number of builder and carpenter men who were temporarily employed on the farm and I learned a lot of common horse sense from them. Then too there were other farm employees working for the low wages of those days.

Some of our time was spent riding round the 5 000 morgen farm either collecting cattle or much more exciting, rounding up ostriches and bringing them in to the kraals for the clipping of their feathers. This entailed hard riding. With three or four horsemen keeping the birds bunched and moving in the right direction was quite an art. Every now and then one would dash madly away at full speed and two of us would chase after it and bring it back to the group. I soon learned to ride well and to keep my seat in all the turning and twisting involved.

I can think of no better way of learning to ride. Sometimes we would have to round up our charges on ground pitted in places with meercat holes. More often than not out wily horses would dodge around these, but I was not always lucky and many a time when my horse's foot sank into one I would go flying over his head.

Thinking back, how could anyone have better training for all the unknown war years ahead. It was a hard life but very toughening.

On this farm besides cattle and ostriches there was a good-sized flock of sheep and lucerne under irrigation was cultivated on a fair scale.

After a year on this farm I went to another well-known farmer in the Bedford district, owner of an even larger farm where ostriches were bred in a

* The editors regretfully announce that Mr Lawrence passed away on 27 February this year.

big way and provided the principal income.

Extensive areas were put down to lucerne and camped off. The birds were allowed to run on the lucerne at night and then driven out to veld conditions in the daytime; under such ideal conditions they became very fierce in the breeding season. One had to be very wary when driving them out in the early morning. A good horse accustomed to their ways was most essential.

I was very happy during the one-and-a-half years I spent with this farmer and his family. Here again I had a methodical and strict boss who brooked no slackness. The home set-up was ideal and I was always very comfortably and well looked after.

The working conditions were hard and with long hours but with a little more responsible work. The farmer refused to take a premium and instead said he would pay me a salary and so have a better and more businesslike hold over me. I was paid £2 per month and free board. My father said 'Right, now you will provide for yourself'. With the hard wear and tear of farm work I was hard put to it to keep myself decently clad in farm and other clothes. What better training in finance could any young man have?

I rationed and kept the books of the farm servants, both white and Bantu. There was a more than usually large staff of both.

The intricate work of dealing with the breeding birds in general including the hatching of the pedigree ostrich eggs fell under the management of a very capable and intelligent middle-aged African named Willem. I worked with him and looked up to him for all the finer points of ostrich farming.

We would ride out together in the breeding season with carefully marked pedigreed eggs packed in grain bags hung over our saddles in front of us. With these we would ride slowly and carefully to the far-lying veld camps and place them under a hen who would calmly rise and browse nearby whilst we took her eggs and replaced them with the valuable ones from carefully selected parents chosen for the length, quality and curl of their wing feathers. Chicks hatched out naturally and looked after by the adopted wild mother were healthier than the incubated ones.

During those youthful years Willem was truly my guide, philosopher and friend and as we often rode together we could talk and discuss farming, politics and the facts of life as they affected both African and European.

'At breeding time groups of about fifty ostriches would run at night in one acre-sized paddocks of lucerne; in the morning they were driven out to larger veld camps where they would have a more natural diet of bush and grass and be able to pick up numerous pebbles to aid their digestion.

One cold and frosty morning Willem and I rode down as usual, blowing on our hands as we went, to turn out a particularly vicious bunch of birds. The male birds usually fight amongst themselves to decide who is to be cock of the walk and in this case we had one very cocky and vicious male bird to deal with; he came straight for us and tried to get under the thorn branch we each held. On this occasion I had to leave my well-trained horse and take a fresh and well-fed carriage animal. Provided one kept one's horse's head to the ostrich there was little danger. This morning when the bird stormed up with wings outspread and making a loud squawky hiss, my horse could not face it and pulled around in panic. The ostrich had his chance and got in several kicks on my mount's rump. He chased us round and round the paddock with my horse bucking to get me off and I took my chance when near the fence and slipped off and through the wire. On foot with thorn branches at the ready we were able to rescue my poor horse who had fortunately taken only glancing kicks and had not been ripped. Round one went to Cocky!

The next morning we were faced with a fully confident and holy terror of a bird. We had taken with us a solid lath about the size and length of a rake handle. Willem said to me 'Master Geoffrey, it's your job today, hit the bird on the back of the neck and that will fix him. But mind, you must hit him just right, hard enough, but if you break his neck it's £200 out of your pocket!'

There was no other way; Willem held the horses whilst I went in to do battle. Cocky came straight for me, hesitated a second whilst we looked at each other and then made a rush. It was my tummy or his neck. I got in one beautiful crack in the right spot and down he went as if shot. I thought I had broken his neck and visualised my boss's rage. However, he staggered up and made off a wiser bird and from then on lost his place in the flock as cock of the walk.

Sometimes unexpected visitors would turn up and I would be told to go out in the moonlight and look for guinea fowl roosting in the distant thorn trees. A young Afrikaner lad of my age would come with me. It was difficult to distinguish at night between a bunch of mistletoe and a guinea fowl and so great stealth was needed to get under the tall mimosa trees with the moon in the

background to show up the difference. We seldom came back with less than half-a-dozen fat birds.

And so time moved on pleasantly until news came of the Great War breaking out. Soon the Germans started trouble on the German South West border followed by open rebellion amongst our own people. I was then eighteen years old and followed the events overseas and in our northern districts with the greatest interest. Many of my school friends were involved and were fighting in the commandos under General Botha against Generals de Wet and Maritz.

With the Great War coming so soon after the Boer War when peace had been declared only twelve years earlier at Vereeniging, there were fears of a general and bitter civil war.

News of school friends' deaths in action soon reached us as also of a young friend of the family who frequently used to ride over with his brother. Noel Trollip's* death in the fighting against the rebels was a sad blow to us all and brought home the bitterness of the fighting where in so many cases brother was shooting down brother.

Under General Botha's fine leadership the Government forces brought a speedy end to the uprising. Recruiting commenced and preparations were made to put an end to the German attacks on our frontier posts as well as their incitement to our rural population to rebel.

Later at the request of the British Government to invade and conquer German South West Africa our Government decided to settle all further trouble and to carry out this military undertaking in the interest of our Allies and ourselves, thereby also anticipating any similar action by the enemy against the Union of South Africa.

With all the unrest and rumours round about I was determined to join up when I turned nineteen at the beginning of 1915 in spite of my parents' wishes; they argued that I was too young.

Towards the end of February I faced my boss with some trepidation and asked for the loan of a horse to ride into Bedford, fourteen miles distant and to sign on for active service. To my surprise he did not attempt to stop me and in due course I was given a rail ticket to the nearest military depot in East London.

And so after the usual formalities of medical inspection and other details I was signed on as a trooper in the Natal Light Horse.

This regiment was then encamped at Maitland at the Cape and not being up to full strength with Natal men was seeking men from the farming areas who could ride and shoot.

On arrival in East London with several other lads picked up en route we were billeted in the old Drill Hall. Here we were given two blankets, a waterproof sheet and rations. And so our army hardening-up process started with what seemed a very hard bed on the floor.

We left soon afterwards by train for Cape Town and finally Maitland camp. We were all still in our civilian clothes and looking rather bedraggled. At the camp there were insufficient tents and we were told to make shift under a hedge.

My mother had come down from Tulbagh to see me and was quite distressed to find her son sleeping in the open with only a hedge for shelter. We were young and tough by now and fortunately the March weather was fine and the nights as yet not too cold.

Shortly after this tents arrived for all and with them our uniforms and a proper camp was laid out and organised. Finally our horses also arrived. A large consignment of only partially tamed mounts came from South America and each of us was allowed to pick his own horse. I chose a sturdy Basutu type of medium height with good legs and dapple grey in colour. I called him Rifle. The first day of mounting was a real rodeo. Some horses had never been ridden before. One saw men in all directions on bucking horses sticking on as long as they could and then go flying. Most of us were in the same case. I stuck on pretty well and managed to quieten my horse after an hour's struggle. From then on Rifle and I were pals and we stuck together until the end.

A few of our recruits had come from the Reef and had never ridden a horse before. There were many casualties, moans and flying somersaults amongst them for a week or so.

With our mounts chosen and partially tamed squadron drill was started and every morning we rode out to Maitland plain and went through our manoeuvres. Soon at hand signal and whistle from our squadron leader our mounts would know what to do and would turn into line or section with little guidance from the rider.

We had three weeks of constant mounted drill and practising tactics in assault and withdrawal. Rifles were issued and were carried in gun buckets slung at the side of the saddle and supported by a loose leather strap to the upper arm, a comfortable as well as quick way of withdrawing for action.

* Noel Trollip was killed at Lutzputs on 18 January 1915 in one of the final engagements of the Rebellion.

At the end of March the regiment, complete with horses and equipment, embarked and sailed for Lüderitzbucht. The horses were lowered by crane into lighters alongside and towed ashore. There being no proper jetties the troops also disembarked onto towed lighters.

The three weeks spent in Lüderitz after landing passed quickly whilst we were kept fairly busy with manoeuvres and various mounted tactics. We practised time and again our drill of going into action. Wheeling from column into line for the charge by troop or squadron, more usually wheeling into sections of four when three would dismount and open fire whilst No. 4 galloped to cover with the four horses until called for.

A trooper is always occupied having not only his uniform and equipment to keep in order but has his horse to groom, feed and water.

Usually at midday orders would be given for bathing parade and we would ride naked and bare-back down to the beach and ride well out into the surf. Our mounts enjoyed this as much as we did and riding back at full gallop improved the rookies' technique and the thigh gripping muscles.

Occasionally we had a little excitement with an enemy plane coming over, the only one they had. In those days none of us had seen an aeroplane before. It was believed that the pilot carried packets of steel darts which he would throw overboard and there were yarns from the longer-established infantry that there had been some near misses. We all tried our hand potting at him which at least kept him at a safe height. No hits were seen!

When we landed, Lüderitz was a town of empty buildings with not a civilian let alone a woman to be seen. Its only water was from a big condensing plant and very peculiar tasting. Later water supply was shipped from Table Bay and also by rail when the junction with the Union was cleared of the enemy.

Many regiments of infantry had been in Lüderitz since its capture many months before and these men had gradually fought their way inland along the railway line clearing and creating waterpoints for us mounted troops until we could swing north of the desert.

Whilst in camp my half-section and I would make a round of visits after supper and our stables

duties. We had the Natal Carbineers and several infantry regiments nearby and spent many cheery evenings chatting with them. Being new chums we were put in the picture with regard to all they had been through. We had had very little news of the skirmishing with the enemy and of the hard work done by these men whilst in camp at home.

The infantry had had a tough time in the blazing summer heat with at first little cover and short of food and water supplies. In contrast we set up camp soon after landing and were quite comfortable in tents with only eight men per tent. Lights out at night was given by bugle call as again reveille in the early dawn. After reveille stables was sounded followed in due course by the ever popular call 'come to the cookhouse door, boys!'

And so time passed busily and happily until the day came to strip our goods to the minimum and march off at last through the desert and into the interior.

We had been issued with ex-Boer War mounted infantry saddles with high fore and aft peaks. The rear peak was heightened by our rolled overcoat strapped securely and in front by a light blanket in the same way. With all this impediment it was no easy job to get mounted and to mount in a hurry.

With a full bandolier of ammunition slung round the shoulder, one grasped rifle, the reins and horse's mane and got mounted. It took some practice to get one's leg up and over with a fresh horse. I often blessed my choice of a lower than average mount. Many a time I had to stand by and hold a frisky high horse for a pal to mount and then catch up with the column.

We moved from water hole to water hole encountering several mines on the way. There were a number of casualties to horses and men who were unfortunate enough to tread on one.

Water was always scarce and had to be very carefully conserved. When possible we marched mostly at night to spare our horses and for secrecy.

A very sudden and cold spell struck us as we reached higher ground and we rode in a gale of bitterly cold wind for two or three nights. Clothed in thin khaki drill tunics we were quite unprepared for the extreme cold and had to throw discretion to the wind and dismount and make blazing fires for our horses and ourselves many times during the night.



The Natal Light Horse marching from Lüderitzbucht, April 1915

The enemy were retiring just ahead of us poisoning the wells before they withdrew and leaving many booby traps for the unwary. Our engineers were well up to their tricks and did splendid work a few days ahead of our column. Clearing the wells was difficult and uncertain but water was somehow always provided though this meant slow progress until the advance guard with engineers reported the water fit for use again. All this time we had been trekking parallel but some distance from the railway. Once we had reached Aus and Kuibis on the higher plateau, water was more plentiful. From Kuibis we swung northwards away from the railway and made for Bethane.

This little village we reached at dawn one morning and we galloped past the outskirts cheering wildly. From every building though barely light we could see white flags waving. Several oxen and mule waggons were trekking at the fastest pace the drivers could whip up their teams. They were moving parallel with us and on each wagon two or three men were lying flat and taking pot shots at us. With the bumping waggons they had little hope of hitting anyone. Squadron after squadron rode through without loss. We were not interested in small fry and were making for Gibeon 120 miles distant on the rail line to Windhoek. From the village of Bethane we moved fast

trekking day and night with a few stops to spare our horses in keeping up. With us light mule transport carried grain feed to supplement the fairly good grazing. Water was no problem now and we passed many open pans of stagnant water.

It must have been on the third afternoon after passing Bethane that we were having a rest with our horses off-saddled and grazing at our feet when scouts came galloping in. They brought news that at Gibeon Siding about twenty miles distant three trains with steam up were being hastily loaded to evacuate important stores to Windhoek. By now our regiment had become one of a brigade commanded by Colonel Jack Royston* and under the overall command of General Sir Duncan MacKenzie. It was planned that the combined force moving at speed would surprise the enemy and cut the railway line north of Gibeon Siding before the loaded trains could pull out for Windhoek.

* Colonel John Robinson Royston, CMG, DSO commanded the 9th Mounted Brigade in German South West Africa. Born in 1862 he had first seen action in the Zulu War in 1879. In the South African War 1899-1902 he helped Duncan MacKenzie raise the 2nd Imperial Light Horse and subsequently commanded a brigade of Australian mounted infantry. During the Barmatic campaign of 1906 he raised a volunteer unit known as Royston's Horse, and in 1914 he was responsible for the organisation of the Natal Light Horse for service in South West Africa. He subsequently served in Palestine where he commanded an Australian Light Horse Brigade. A gallant and energetic leader he was nicknamed 'Gallop Jack' by the Australian troops and is reputed to have ridden six horses to death.



Col J.R. Royston

Orders were immediately given to saddle up and off we moved. It so happened that on that day my half-section Landrey* and myself had been given the unpopular job of leading the squadron's ammunition mule. It was hard riding that night and the two of us would take it in turn to lead the mule by a rope whilst the other drove him on from the rear. Coming suddenly on a bush or tree the mule would invariably want to go the opposite side to the rider and just about pull one's arm out of its socket. We would often have to let go in desperation and then chase after the brute and regain the rope. No matter what, we had to keep up with our fast-riding squadron.

It was a very bright moonlight night and with hard going we reached a point about two miles north of Gibeon Siding and blew up the line with a charge of dynamite. It was now about 2 a.m. and with a full moon shining the countryside was clearly visible for a couple of hundred yards or more.

At this point there was a raised embankment for the railway. The Natal Light Horse and the 2nd Imperial Light Horse lined the eastern side of the embankment awaiting the enemy who were ex-

pected to attack from Gibeon town west of us. The Natal Light Horse was on the left, the 2nd Imperial Light Horse on the right. My Squadron, D, was on the extreme left adjoining our C, B, and A Squadrons.

It was a strong position for the waiting dismounted troopers, with their horses half-a-mile in the rear with other uncommitted mounted regiments in readiness. What could not be known or seen in the moonlight was a culvert under the rail embankment 200 yards on the left of D Squadron of the Natal Light Horse.

An enemy recce party came riding up a main road running at right angles to the line and leading towards the centre of the two regiments. When close enough to be clearly seen Colonel Park Gray** challenged them. They whirled about at once and galloped off with rifle fire from our troops to speed them.

The battle was now on. The enemy recce had made a good appraisal of the situation and within the hour the Germans were up in force with two 15-pounder field guns and a number of machine guns. Both sides opened fire at once at what little could be seen in the moonlight. The German dismounted infantry took up positions a couple of hundred yards away from the rail embankment in bushy country. Their field guns soon opened fire with bursts of shrapnel above our position behind the easily seen embankment. A party of enemy machine gunners made their way through the culvert, placed two machine guns on the east side of the embankment and enfiladed the whole of our position. Men dug frantically into the embankment with their bayonets if they could though very many of D Company were killed or wounded with the first bursts. The casualties mounted fast. It was realized that the position was impossible and orders were given to withdraw to the horse lines in the rear.

The Imperial Light Horse on the right got out without much difficulty and A, B and C Squadrons of Natal Light Horse withdrew with little loss. Unfortunately D Squadron was pinned down and suffered very severe casualties. By daylight the remainder of D Squadron, now reduced by casualties to half strength, cut off and surround-

* Trooper J.D.P. Landrey. Landrey saw subsequent service in East Africa with the 12th SA infantry and ended the war as a Gunner in the SA Heavy Artillery in South Africa.

** Lieutenant-Colonel J. Park Gray, commanded The Natal Light Horse.

ed, had no option but to surrender. The Germans were in high spirits and as they smashed our rifles to pieces on the rails, shouted 'Hoch der Kaiser, what will King George say now!' At this stage from a spot just north of Gibeon Siding our 12th Citizen Battery opened fire on the enemy guns and scattered the teams and gunners. The Germans, seeing our mounted troops preparing to advance, realized the game was up. They hurriedly packed up their machine guns and galloped off at the same time forcing our men taken prisoner to run with them alongside their horses. With our mounted men in full pursuit all the prisoners were able to drop out one by one their captors having their own skins to look after.

After a running fight, an attempt was made by the enemy machine gunners to get their pieces into action but before they could fire our men were on top of them and all six machine guns were captured. With them we took two hundred of the enemy prisoners. The two field guns with their teams had perforce been abandoned and taken by our men. Natal Light Horse casualties that night were —

Killed	3 officers and 21 men
Wounded	49 all ranks.

Nearly all of these were in D Squadron. Strength of Squadron was 120 all ranks.

To go back to Landrey and myself with the ammunition mule that early morning, we were disgusted to find we could not join our pals in the firing line but had to remain in the horse lines with the mule. We were consoled somewhat when told we would very likely have to dash up when more ammunition was required.

In the horse lines we had many whistling long-range bullets coming from over the embankment as well as shrapnel fired at random to panic our horses. No one was hit, however.

In the morning we went down to the scene of action and found many of our friends who had been killed lying there. We did what we could for the wounded though many had already been evacuated to hospital in the town of Gibeon.

I helped carry a man badly hit in the stomach. There were only four of us to carry the stretcher and we had a good three miles to go. A very fine Padre — I think his name was Roberts — comforted the poor fellow who was suffering terribly from thirst as well as his wound. More than a small sip at a time would have been fatal and it was hard to have to drag the water bottle held by the Padre

to his mouth from his grasping hands. It seemed an endless carry but we got him to the hospital where he died the next day. All our wounded were very well looked after by the German nurses together with many of their own men.

With the end of the fighting and surrender of all German forces in the area together with the town of Gibeon, mopping up and reorganising generally was the order of the day.

Our horses were in a bad way after the forced marches and in fact quite a number had to be destroyed. I had the unpleasant and horrible job of acting as escort and helper to an experienced officer detailed to ride back along the route we had marched and shoot the poor horses that had fallen out. Many would have pulled through with a little time and care but this was not possible as they could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy.

Each regiment camped apart in a wide area of veld where our horses could have grazing. They were knee-haltered and let loose at night after being watered and grain fed in the horse lines. In the early morning each of us would hunt for his mount and bring him in for the day. My grey was easily picked out from the many others and I had little trouble searching for him. One morning, however, I saw an Imperial Light Horse man leading off a horse that in the distance looked like mine. Going nearer, I saw it was mine. I said 'Hey! that's my horse'. A tall bearded fellow looked fiercely down at me quite ready for a scrap when we both recognised each other. It was Allan Fitzpatrick* who had been a prefect in the same dormitory at school in Grahamstown. We shook hands on it and had quite a yarn before parting, he to smouse around for another horse. Horse thieving between the various regiments was quite common and a fine art if you could get away with it.

For several weeks we were encamped here hoping for orders to march north along the line to Marietal and finally Windhoek. Apart from the occasional outpost or horse guard at night each section slept under their particular bush with their saddles for pillows and the overhead stars to wink them to sleep. All of us were very short of food; we lived almost entirely on meat which was very cheap, five shillings being the usual price for a

* Trooper A. C. Fitzpatrick, 2nd Imperial Light Horse, the son of Percy Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick was subsequently commissioned and served in East Africa as a 2nd Lieutenant with the 4th SA Horse.



German 15 – pdr guns, captured in the fight at Gibeon, 27 April 1915

keep. There was no salt to be had and a half-p of mealie meal each day was our ration.

oon we heard of General Botha taking place af- r place by encircling movements with two ounted commandos in the far north and it was alized that we would not be needed in the fast- osing phase of the campaign.

was finally decided to send our regiment home here it would be disbanded. Our horses were to e left behind in too poor a condition for imme- ate use. Ox and donkey transport waggons were o take us to the nearest railhead. In this ig- ominious way we were told off to our respective waggons after handing in all arms and equipment nd for many days jolted over the rough tracks to uibis. It was a carefree journey, though slow. e had very cheery camping evenings round blaz- g fires, sound sleep on the ground and wakened efore dawn by the coloured driver's rousing call f 'Op staan! Koffie maak! Inspan! Trek!' – and f we would go creaking our way through the ush.

eing closely packed together we soon noticed everal companions scratching. They were looked askance and murmurs of lice were heard. owever, by the time we reached railhead

everyone of us had our own private troubles! There seemed to be marching and counter-marching going on continuously.

A fairly quick journey followed from Kuibis in open rail trucks to Lüderitz and from there by ship to Durban. Whilst at sea we were able to wash and put paid to our pestilential pals with boiling water and arrived smartened up and presentable for the great reception given us, first at Durban and then Pietermaritzburg.

Many of the regiments came from Pietermaritzburg so that here the town was almost *en fête* for the few days we stayed until our discharge.

In due course I arrived back at my home in the little town of Tulbagh where my father was the Resident Magistrate, there to await developments before deciding what further action to take in the great conflict. Thus ended the first phase of my military service.

Service overseas and campaign in Western Egypt

Soon after reaching home from the South West African campaign, came the great news of the surrender of all the German forces and the territory of South West Africa to General Louis

Botha on behalf of the Union of South Africa and confirmed by the peace treaty signed at Otavi on the 9th July, 1915.

With the returning and disbanding troops from South West Africa recruiting for overseas and East Africa service commenced. By now I had made up my mind to join the overseas brigade being formed and for which five thousand were needed to represent our country on the Western Front together with the contingents from the other Dominions. Accordingly early in August 1915 I took train for the Potchefstroom camp. Quite a number of us arrived in the early morning and we were met and marched off by a cocky little lance-corporal to the cantonments a few miles away. Here we were billeted in what were the horse stables erected for the use of Lord Robert's mounted troops. The nights were still very cold and the concrete floors hard to bed down on.

I soon met friends whom I had known at school. There were two Bradford* boys from Kimberley who asked me to join them in their Company that was being formed of Kimberley men. They took me to see their company commander, Capt. H.H. Jenkins,** who agreed to take me on though my only Kimberley qualification was that I was born there and left soon afterwards. What stood me in good stead was the Natal Light Horse uniform I wore and my service in South West Africa. I was signed on as a private in C Company of the 1st Regiment 1st South African Infantry Brigade with the pay of a shilling a day in conformity with the overseas Imperial troops.

Infantry drill and physical training drill started within the next few days. Quite fifty percent of the men were in civilian clothes. On parade we had our sergeant drilling us in civvies and a white straw boater hat. We certainly looked a very queer bunch, old soldiers of the Boer War and earlier, youngsters from school and many old stiffs looking for a jaunt overseas.

It was apparently decided by those in the higher command to test the *bona fides* of all concerned and to sort out all but those truly dedicated for the serious job ahead.

The next morning after the usual hard session of physical training we were lectured by the regimental Sergeant Major, a regular soldier previously in the Welsh Guards. He was a barrel-chested old soldier of impressive bearing and personality, later known and respected throughout the brigade

and given the name of Robin Redbreast. He gave us an harangue on the infantry soldier whose sole aim he maintained was to close with the enemy and get in with the bayonet. His following blood-curdling description of bayonet fighting fairly made one's hair rise and even the keenest of us was affected. The effect on the stiffs and scribble-shankers, however, was immediate and chaotic. Over two hundred scrambled for the next Johannesburg train.

Many weeks of organising and equipping followed. It seemed we had to have every possible type of inoculation besides the intensive medical examinations. Soon we paraded by companies to get our regimental numbers, that most important identification which was to be quoted and listed against our names for our lifetime in army service and after. Identity discs were worn in duplicate around one's neck with number, regiment and religion clearly stamped. Uniforms, underclothing and equipment were issued and we began to look more like soldiers.

Our brigade consisted of four infantry regiments, a Field Ambulance and a Signal Company. The four regiments were the 1st South African Infantry recruited from the Cape. The 2nd from Natal and Free State and incidentally a number of men from the Border districts, the 3rd South African Infantry from the Transvaal and Rhodesia, the 4th South African Infantry was the South African Scottish drawn from all the Scottish regiments and associations in the Union. The latter regiment wore kilts and prided themselves on their Scottish association and customs, though there were a considerable number of Jock Van der Merwe amongst their doughty fighters who more than held their own in a scrap.

The brigade had amongst its members a very good cross-section from all walks of life. City workers, miners, civil servants, professional men, farmers and students. Their strapping physique, generally high education and experience in warfare was very marked. There were veterans from

* Privates F.K. Bradford and G.W.B. Bradford. Both had served in the Kimberley Regiment in South West Africa and were commissioned in March 1916 in the 1st SA Infantry Regiment. Both later transferred to the Northumberland Fusiliers. 2nd Lieutenant G.W.B. Bradford was later attached to the Royal Flying Corps and died while a prisoner of war in Germany in February 1917.

** Captain H.H. Jenkins had served with the 2nd Kimberley Regiment in German South West. He finished the war in command of the 1st SA Infantry Regiment with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. This distinguished officer's service was recognised by the award of the CMG, DSO and Croix de Guerre. He was mentioned in despatches on several occasions. In 1915 Lieutenant-Colonel Jenkins commanded the 46th Royal Fusiliers in Russia.

the Nile Expedition, the Boer War and earlier African campaigns and a high percentage had recently engaged in the Rebellion and German South West African fighting. Officers were appointed mostly from the citizen force regiments. At the senior ranks, campaign experienced officers or permanent members of the Union Defence Force were in command. Our brigade commander was Brigadier-General Tim Lukin, a man with a long and distinguished record.

After a period of weeks the brigade embarked at Cape Town for England. Our regiment entrained on the 18th September reaching the coast after a long journey and embarked on the *Durban Castle* on the 20th September, 1915. On our journey down the rank and file were served meals in the dining saloons on a strictly economy basis. However, when nearing the Cape we pulled up at Bellville on a side line for a last bumper breakfast. That early morning was a memorable occasion as our long train halted amongst the Port Jackson trees in full bloom close alongside us.

The company officers had a word with the chefs and asked them to give us a slap-up breakfast, reminding them that this would be the last meal many of our lads would have in their home country. The chefs and stewards responded magnificently, our orders were taken as if at the Ritz. I don't suppose they or any of us realized how few of the five thousand would return and that less than twenty percent actually would do so. Those Port Jackson trees at Bellville give me nostalgic memories when I pass them by train these days en route to Cape Town.

By 5 p.m. we were all aboard. The docks were thronged with relations and well-wishers to cheer and wave us good luck. There were many tears and sad hearts amongst mothers and dear ones. My mother and a close friend saw me off though the friend could not stay for weeping.

Off we steamed into the dusk and soon very many were sick. Two companies or five hundred of us were packed into a hold below the waterline with little air from the temporary canvas ventilators; the stug and stench was unbearable. A group of us took our blankets and staked a portion of the deck for our sleeping quarters. This portion was always jealously guarded by one of us. The only snag for the deck sleepers was the strident 4 a.m. 'wakie, wakie, show a leg' from a sailor with a hosepipe who gave little quarter before turning the water onto the backward.

We had a three weeks voyage of discomfort relieved by physical jerks, lectures and a few good concerts at night, also an interesting day's stop at Madeira and a close view of the imposing needle-like mountains of Teneriffe as we passed.

We must have disembarked at Plymouth on about the 12th October, 1915, and entrained the same day for our quarters at Bordon camp. To most of us it was a great thrill to land in England, the land of our forebears which so far we had only read about. We arrived in the dark at a station some distance from the camp and I remember marching in the moonlight through strange-looking wooded country to the tune of 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' — a song that was quite new to us.

On reaching Bordon camp we were very pleased to be told off into wooden hutments with an army cot for each of us, and of all the luxuries, a centre fire place alight with a welcoming blaze and plenty of coal. This was a typical regular army camp complete with cookhouses and camp amenities and the usual large drill square. Here we were to spend two-and-a-half months of intensive training before going to the front. It was in these comparatively comfortable bungalows that we made fast friendships amongst the thirty-odd occupants. There were days of hard work, long training marches and after knock-off cheery evenings round two fires.

Towards the end of November the temperature fell sharply and we had our first experience of slippery iced roads when marching to the butts for our first musketry practice. I was given a boost to find at the end of the day that my score was amongst the first ten in the company. One of our tests was firing 15 rounds rapid at 400 yards. All fifteen rounds had to be fired within one minute to qualify. By getting 11 bulls and four inners I pulled up on my earlier poorer scores.

We were given quite frequent weekend leave to London though one had to have private funds to supplement our weekly pay of 3/6. Half our pay was deducted for dependants. However, money went much further in those days and a very good bed and breakfast was had for 3/6. A number of us and some New Zealanders went regularly to No. 36 Crichton Place, Bloomsbury Square, where the two sisters and an old mother were wonderfully good to us. It was like a home from home. They even wrote to some of us later in France and sent parcels to some.

During the day a couple of us would explore London — there was so much to see — picture galleries, St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussauds, and at night the theatre. My first ever theatre was 'Peg 'O My Heart' and it was quite marvellous. St. Paul's was wonderful with the tombs of Nelson and Wellington in the crypt and the Whispering Galley up above and then, of course, Holman Hunt's picture of Christ knocking at the door. I remember standing and gazing in what seemed a special light at this amazing picture which seemed lit up and lifelike typifying the Light of the World.

London was then teeming with Dominion troops. The Anzacs and South Africans got on very well together. If any Anzacs were in trouble — as they often were, a Co-ee would bring Dominion troops nearby rushing to help. At that time there seemed to be few Canadians about.

One Sunday on a lovely sunny morning in November a friend and I decided to see the renowned Petticoat Lane. My friend was in love with a very sweet and beautiful girl so of course she came too. The highly vociferous salesman was truly an expert and most amusing. He declared he could supply all our wants from a needle to an anchor. Casting a sly and appreciative eye at my pal and his girl, he produced with a flourish the latest in chamber pots much to the mirth and embarrassment of us three and the laughter of the crowd. We worked our way down the lane thronged with a happy jostling crowd of Cockney-voiced salesmen and their customers. It was an entertaining and interesting glimpse into the poorer side of London life.

It became evident in December that we were winding up our training and would soon be off to the front. In camp discipline, drill and fighting tactics were stepped up and it became difficult to get weekends off. Christmas passed restlessly and all leave was cancelled.

On the 31st December the 1st Regiment entrained for the docks and embarked on the *Saxonia*. The rest of the brigade followed in the next few days and embarked on other vessels. Once aboard we heard we were bound for Egypt. Conditions on board this ship were quite luxurious compared to our experience on the *Durham Castle* and the short voyage was pleasant. Approaching Gibraltar the ship did a lot of zig-zagging to put off enemy submarines and we were constantly turned out for life belt and boat drill. Malta was soon reached but

no one was allowed ashore. One's chief memories of the place were the queer smelling cigarettes sold us by hawkers coming aboard. Alexandria could be seen in the distance as we approached two days later. The land seemed lower than the sea and it appeared as though we were about to steam right over the low-lying sandy coast studded with palm trees and white buildings. On landing we marched through the town to our quarters in the camp six miles away and were told off to our tents pitched in readiness for us. We were soon disenchanted with the land of Egypt. Wind, sand and flies were our constant plague and made drill and field manoeuvres more than usually unpleasant. The people round about had to be guarded against with very watchful eyes. Purveyors of all kinds of goods were adept at slipping anything they could lay their hands on under the cover of the voluminous folds of their cassock-like robes. Soon there was a rifle missing and the owner in serious trouble charged with a soldier's unforgiveable crime. Youngsters were always about selling eggs and shouting 'Eggs la cock — eggs la cock — all very nice, very clean, very sanitary' and much else besides. They too were very expert at nipping any unguarded belongings.

Our company commander, Captain Jenkins, gave very stern warning to all of us assembled and ordered no tents to be left unattended at any time. He took the opportunity to warn us young fellows against the flesh pots of the town, the can-can night shows and the utterly depraved exhibitions in the low dives of Alex. Good old 'Mud guts' a fine old warrior of much experience looked after his company like a father and knew every man of us. Strict and fair he was always to be found in the hottest spots when his company was in action.

The brigade continued intensive training and in battle tactics was better suited to local conditions. Very strict discipline was maintained throughout. We were highly commended after the brigade inspection by Lieutenant-General Sir John Maxwell for our discipline and good turn-out for his inspection about a week after we landed.

Australian and New Zealand troops were much in evidence in Alex. They certainly made things lively and there were constant scraps with the Red Caps. The Aussies had a fearsome record as great fighters and the kind of men to have beside one in battle. They also had a very witty sense of humour. The following story is told of General Birdwood who met two happily drunk Aussies who failed to salute him:

General Birdwood: Why did you not salute me?

Aussie: Why the hell should we? Who are you anyway?

General Birdwood: I am General Birdwood!

Aussie: Well, why don't you wear a feather in your ass like any other bird would?

Fortunately for them the humour of their quick-witted repartee bowled him over and he left them standing. Our camp was near the sea and every morning we marched to the beach for a refreshing bathe. The water was cold compared to the sea water at home.

I think the loveliest memory I have of Alexandria is of the frequent concerts in the YMCA Hall given by the ladies, the wives of permanent residents of the town. They put on some really excellent shows with good singing and acting. There I heard for the first time the song 'If you were the only Girl in the World and I were the only Boy', and also the well-acted 'Madam will you walk, Madam will you talk with me', an elderly man making his part so well with his beautiful madam counterpart. Away from all civil and social life these concerts had a great impact on us and were very morale-boosting.

Shortly before we embarked for Mersa Matruh, I looked up Padre Eustace Hill* at the YMCA and he and Corporal George Tobias** (later Bishop of Ovambo) were packing up for the journey ahead. Corporal Tobias was then in the South African Medical Corps and working in the Field Hospital besides doing duty as a Padre, one of the very few in the Ranks in those days.

Father Hill did me a great kindness by persuading me to take a paper-back copy of the *Cloister and the Hearth* by Charles Reade. At first I demurred on account of the extra weight to be carried in my pack. It turned out to be my greatest joy at the end of each day at Sollum, reading a chapter by the light of a candle in our little shelter.

As well as the concerts given by the ladies of Alexandria we had quite frequent sing-songs at night out in the open. The high talent was quite amazing.

After about a month at this camp we prepared to move into the desert in our campaign against the Turks and Senussi. With Turkish armaments and regular Turkish army officers leading them the Senussi tribe of fanatical Arabs were threatening the Western approaches to Egypt. They had a force of some five thousand men, well armed with field guns and machine guns. An indecisive battle had been fought on Christmas Day in which the

Royal Scots had had severe casualties. On the 23rd January another battle was fought at Halazin about 20 miles north west of Mersa Matruh. For this the 2nd South African Infantry had been sent to reinforce General Wallace's force of New Zealanders, Sikhs and mounted yeomanry. Here the 2nd S.A.I. had their baptism of fire and had fairly severe losses. Two officers and nine other ranks were killed and four officers and one hundred and two other ranks wounded.

The battle had been won but the main enemy force was undefeated. It was decided to replace the Sikhs and New Zealanders with the South African brigade and with the remaining force of Dorset Yeomanry and a battery of artillery were given the task of clearing the enemy from the Western boundary of Egypt.

The 1st, 3rd and 4th South African Infantry embarked on about the 12th February in small trawler-sized vessels that made us feel every one of the choppy waves before we reached Mersa Matruh. Here we found the rest of the force together with a large assembly of camels for transport. On the 14th we marched out from Matruh with full packs and in fine form. We carried one day's rations and a change of underclothing in our haversacks and a blanket and overcoat in our valises besides, of course, our full equipment of ammunition, rifle, bayonet, entrenching tool and water bottle. The weight varied between 60 and 70 lbs. After a short halt for dinner close to the site of the Christmas Day battle we continued until reaching some wells and palm trees having put fourteen miles behind us. At these wells we found a thousand camels loaded with provisions which were to keep pace with us on the march. The following day we were accompanied by two 18 pounder guns and the camel transport. We climbed a steep hill and then kept fairly close to the sea all day doing another 14 miles by 4 p.m. when we halted for the night. Men's feet were blistering and a good healer was sea water, as we found after running down to the beach nearby and having a most refreshing dip. We did this whenever possible all along the march.

* Chaplain Captain Eustace Hill, twice wounded in action, his first wound costing him the loss of his right arm, Chaplain Hill ended the war in a German Prisoner of War camp. For his gallantry in action he was awarded the Military Cross in December 1916.

** Later Chaplain Captain G.W.R. Tobias, MC while still with the 1st South African Field Ambulance he was wounded at Delville Wood. He too was later awarded the Military Cross for his service in France.

I was on guard this night doing picket duty about half-a-mile away on the perimeter of the camp. It rained all night, was bitterly cold and by morning we were wet through. On our third day we marched off at 8 a.m. and I was one of the screen of the advance guard. Whilst the main body were marching on a fairly good road the screen were stumbling up and down rocky kopjies and having to keep up a much faster pace to stay ahead of the main body. We kept about 2 miles from the sea and passed many lightly-ploughed fields sown to barley by the Bedouins. On this third day we covered sixteen to seventeen miles and were well pleased to reach a small village for our journey's end for the day where there were about a dozen wells a very short distance from the sea. About three in the morning there was a heavy down-pour of rain and I woke to find myself lying in a pool of water. We stood to arms as usual, very cold at 4.30 a.m. Fortunately the rain stopped after sunrise, and we were given a chance to dry our clothing.

We were now near to the enemy and as a precaution had dug trenches and strengthened our position all day. This continued for five days. We were fortunate in getting more supplies via the camel transport as well as a big mail.

The wells all along our route were made, we heard, by the Roman legions who marched along these shores before the birth of Christ, battling against the barbarians as we were doing then against the Bedouins. The wells are circular, about 18 inches in diameter and drilled through hard rock usually fifty to sixty feet deep. We got to know the depth of the wells by the number of put-tee lengths required to reach the water with a dixie attached. Some again were much wider and men had gone down to explore.

We continued our march on the 21st February but for only a short distance to the little village of Um-jeilah, halted there for the night and left at dawn the next morning marching over fairly good country but no roads. Our destination this time was a big clump of date palms and a number of wells reached early in the afternoon. The sea being near we were soon washing off the dust of the march.

Early the next morning we cleared a flat stretch of ground some distance from our camp as a landing ground for an aeroplane. We marched off soon afterwards and this time I was a member of the rear guard. We had a short supply of water in our bottles and by the time we had done 17 miles were

feeling the heat and thirst. We camped for the night near the seashore behind some sand dunes. A battle put new life into us. Unfortunately water here was very scarce.

February the 25th was a day of rest and for washing clothes. In the afternoon one plane circled and dropped a despatch giving information of the enemy's whereabouts and movements. In the late afternoon urgent orders were given to pack and prepare to march off immediately. Whilst eating and hurriedly packing at the same time, we suddenly heard two field guns booming. Shells came over our company but dropped mainly short or in the sea. Soon the range was found and shells were bursting very close. We fell in ready to move off but were forced to take cover under a sand bank. One shell fell on top of our bank but caused no casualties. Another fell in the middle of several men clustered together a few yards on my left. I saw the lot of them fall over but strangely only one man was killed, the poor chap got a direct hit. One man was wounded. It was a new situation for most and our first battle casualties at close quarters. There was a very tense atmosphere; to each of us it was the moment of truth. Each reacted in different ways. One young chap hurried past us very white in the face momentarily panic-stricken until brought up with a jerk by the example of others and military discipline. One was aware that to keep one's balance in a moment of stark terror it was necessary to harden one's mind against remorse for a comrade killed and mutilated beside one.

The spell was broken by the sharp command of Captain Jenkins to march off. He led us over the ridge and into the open where we extended into a line and dug in. No shells dropped near us now but skimmed overhead into the deserted camp. Half-an-hour later we fixed bayonets and advanced in the dusk on the enemy positions. We stumbled along in the dark for about two thousand yards until we reached the spot the enemy had been firing from. We could hear them shouting to each other quite plainly and expected their attack at any moment. However, they thought better of it and instead pulled out of their strong position and vanished into the night. We stayed in the same place that night peering into the dark for sight of the enemy. After some hours finding all quiet, we took turns in snatching some fitful sleep. It was terribly cold and numbers of hungry fleas plagued us all night. At dawn we marched back into camp and had breakfast, though hardly finished when we were ordered to fall in

and march off. We were going into action that day with only half a bottle of dirty water and full packs... much too heavy a weight for battle conditions at any time and least of all for desert warfare. Greatcoats in this case had always to be carried on account of the cold nights, for their transport by camels would have been too uncertain.

On the 26th February we marched off in column for about three miles, then fixed bayonets and advanced in extended order in support to the 3rd SA Infantry who were about 500 yards ahead of us in the same formation. Soon the Turkish guns opened fire and we could see the black smoked shells falling amongst the men of the 3rd Regiment's advancing line. To our amazement men would fall over as the shells burst amongst them and then they all would be up again moving forward seemingly untouched. Either the shells were of poor quality or the sand took up the explosive effect. Our guns now opened fire and seemed to check the enemy battery. It must have seemed quite an interesting set piece battle seen from afar, the advancing lines of infantry with cavalry on the right making an encircling movement and field guns on a rise supporting the attack going in. To us it was rather different for now bullets were coming over from the 3rd Regiment with whom we were fast closing. Going over a rise we came under direct fire and also banking machine gun fire, as well as shells falling around us. We had a few men wounded here. We were now caught up with the 3rd SA Infantry passing many of their killed and wounded.

I passed a Sergeant-Major sitting up and fast dying from a severed jugular artery spouting blood but waving and cheering us on with the little strength and life left to him. Here we saw many of our South African Medical Corps men carrying wounded men out of the firing line to shelter behind a ridge. Bullets of all kinds were flying thickly about us — it was fortunate the Senussi were very poor marksmen. They were firing with all kinds of rifles, modern as well as old blunderbuss types, using homemade bullets that went bumbling by and some that turned over and over, said by our old soldiers to be sawn off pot legs. I think the poor Sergeant-Major must have had his jugular cut by one.

By this time we had, according to plan, leap-frogged the 3rd SA Infantry and were taking the brunt of the enemy fire. It was here that our extended line passed over a wounded Senussi. We had barely passed when he turned over and fired several shots at us. One of our men, Jock Munro, turned back and plunged his bayonet into him. After Jock's return to our line the fanatical Arab kept firing again so we all turned and put a bullet into him speeding the poor devil to his particular heaven.

We stopped on a bushy rise overlooking a valley below and as we moved down I said to the old soldier beside me 'There seems to be a lot of singing canaries around here.' 'Canaries be blowed', he said, 'those are bullets'. Another rise and into another valley where it seemed im-



1st South African Infantry Brigade being inspected by General Sir Archibald Murray, GOC Egypt, 10 April 1916. The 1st in the foreground, with the remainder of the Brigade barely visible beyond.

possible to cross alive for bullets were flicking and spurting up the sand like raindrops on water. Still no enemy could be seen to fire at. We went down and passed through the valley with only one man near me hit and one mortally wounded. Up the next rise and at last we could see our enemy and open fire. I got off fifteen rounds rapid at white fleeting and dodging figures. I could not say for sure if I hit anyone for we advanced no further. The enemy retired in haste but left several snipers who seemed to be all around us. One of our men was shot and killed by one of them. The snipers were soon spotted and promptly despatched. We were now able to rest for a short while and have something to eat. Here I drank my last drop of water.

The valley with the lethal spurting sand that we passed through always comes very vividly to mind whenever I hear that beautiful hymn to the words of the 23rd Psalm – 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.'

We later found poor old MacDonald, a man in my platoon, an old veteran of many campaigns, lying dead in a bush near where I had been, looking as if peacefully asleep.

At about 4 p.m. we marched back to a well together with the 3rd Regiment led by Colonel Thackeray. Both regiments reformed there, collecting their various dispersed companies. General Lukin and his staff rode up and was given three tremendous cheers. He thanked us all for the prominent part we had played in the defeat of the enemy. Our camp for the night was on a hill two miles away which we reached dead tired and very thirsty. We were able to get a little water from a well and supped on a few biscuits before taking up our positions for the night on the perimeter of the camp.

Reverting to the overall picture of the Agagia battle, as the individual soldier's experience of any action is necessarily limited to the area around him, the infantry attack had routed the enemy centre who were then in turn charged and routed by the Dorset Yeomanry. This charge was said to be one of the last cavalry charges in modern war.

The attack was made in two lines and was met by sturdy resistance from men accustomed to this type of fighting used for centuries past. Heavy fire from their machine guns and infantry met the horsemen armed with swords. The enemy lay

flat once the horsemen were on them and shammed death whilst the swordsmen had difficulty in reaching the prostrate figures with their swords. Charging right through, the Dorsets reformed and galloped back through the Senussi again; this time the Dorset colonel's shot and charging horse landed him at the feet of the Turkish General, Gaafer Pasha. The colonel promptly plunged his sword through the General's right arm as he was about to fire his revolver at him. The General's staff machine guns and many Senussi were taken prisoner and the rest completely scattered. A great deal of booty later fell to our forces as a result of the Senussi defeat. Many very interesting suits of chain mail armour were taken. These were apparently captured from the early Crusaders and handed down the centuries as heirlooms. Centuries-old long-barrelled guns were also found.

The Dorset Yeomanry had a number of killed and wounded who were unfortunately temporarily left on the field whilst the squadrons reformed. The late afternoon when we were being allotted our defensive positions for the night, some yeomanry officers came round asking for South African volunteers to go out into the desert to help look for their wounded. The Dorsets had searched everywhere but had lost all sense of direction due to the sameness of the country. A few of our utterly tired-out men went out but failed in the dusk to find any trace of the men.

I remember having another very cold night without any blanket and woke very early to start around. In the dawn I saw a man staggering towards our lines and challenged him. He was a young Dorset Yeomanry officer wounded, I think in one arm and carrying a revolver in the other. He said he was the only survivor of the 36 killed and wounded in the charge. The Senussi had returned in the night and had killed and mutilated all the wounded and stripped all of them of every stitch of clothing.

That afternoon a gruesome procession of camels and horses entered camp with thirty-six white naked bodies dangling and swaying two at a time on each camel and one to a horse. It was an awesome sight and something many of us as youngsters had never thought could ever be on a lot. The sight of these stark bodies that only yesterday had been fine solidly men was too appalling and suddenly one had a terrifying realization of what possibly lay before us. We were prepared, most of us, with our youthful idealism, to give our lives for the honour of our

country and the cause of lasting peace but, dear God, spare us this dishonoured degradation. The bodies were identified and buried in one grave the same afternoon with all our men attending the short solemn service. Father Eustace Hill officiated and gave a very moving short address. Our men were buried the same day on the battlefield where they had fallen. Our casualties were –
 1st SA Infantry – 5 killed, 30 wounded
 3rd SA Infantry – 11 killed, 74 wounded
 Queen's Own Dorsetshire Yeomanry – 36 killed, 1 wounded.

On the 28th February we were up at 3 a.m., moved off at 5 a.m. and after three hours' marching halted for breakfast. On again afterwards for four hours with ten minutes break in every hour. This in fact was the standard marching routine and how welcome were those ten minutes! In the afternoon we reached Sidi Barani, our destination for the time being, and were pleased to see a few windmills, a barracks and some small buildings all broken down by gunfire from our warships. The following day we were off from all parades and fatigues. Our company collected old planks and wood for a small hut. I managed to get two doors and a table. With the help of four waterproof sheets and other timber contributed by Mac we made quite a respectable shelter. After a bathe in the sea nearby we two settled down for the night in some comfort for our shack was at least more or less rainproof. Sidi Barani was to be our camp for the next seven days and the time was spent in field manoeuvres and many fatigues.

Stores were brought round the coast by ship and these were offloaded by us and stacked ashore. These fatigue parties were quite popular for not all the food, jams and other delicacies, believed to be destined for the Officers' Mess, reached their destination. We young 'uns were not slow to learn the tricks of the trade from our fellow old soldiers. Any supplies were fair game and an accidental fall with a case of jam etc, usually burst it open with contents scattered and in the process lost.

I was on a more unpopular fatigue for days running clearing an area of stones and bush for our aeroplanes' landing ground. Our plane pilot was a South African, a young officer by the name of Van Ryneveldt who later made history with his record making flight from England to South Africa with Quentin Brand as co-pilot. He followed this by rising to be Chief of the General Staff.

On the 4th March a hospital ship arrived and

took on our wounded for transfer to Alexandria. The next day two young friends in our section of No. 11 platoon left to train at an Officers' Training Corps and went off in style by motor transport to Mersa Matruh and Cairo. The two Bradford boys were the first in our company (C) to rise in the army world, though they were followed at different times later by very many others. We gave them a great send-off.

On the 7th March everyone attended the funeral of our brigade men who fell in the Agagia battle and were buried at the time where they fell. The Senussi and Arabs dug up the graves to get the clothing the men were buried in and so their bodies were brought here (Sidi Barani) where they will it is hoped lie in peace in this spot, a permanent garrison town. The 1st, 3rd and 4th Regiments were present at the funeral service taken by Father Hill. The pipers of the 4th (Scottish) Regiment played a lament over the mass graves at the end of the ceremony. The last post was sounded by four buglers of the 3rd SA Infantry and finally each man placed a few stones on the mound completely covering it.

We struck camp in a terrific dust storm on the 9th and marched off in the afternoon on a three-hour march to some wells for the night. The next morning we moved off in a blinding sand storm against a wind directly in our faces. Dust and more dust not only from the men in our company but also two companies ahead of them. One was very aware of every feature of the man's back in the file ahead and of his legs moving up and down to which one's own were keeping pace automatically. How apt was Kipling's description of our marching ordeal in one of his soldier's ballads! 'Don't, don't, don't look at what's in front of you. Boots boots boots boots moving up and down again. Men men men men go mad with watching 'em and there's no discharge in the war'. Those last ten minutes of the fifty in each hour before we threw ourselves down for a rest were sheer agony. It was a point of honour in each company that no man would fall out. None in our company ever did. To add to our trials we had very little water; a three-quarter full bottle had to last to our night's destination. In our last lap of the march on this day a man not as fit as the rest was almost suspended between two comrades, his feet mechanically marching though barely touching ground, their three rifles meanwhile carried by others behind. He only just made it before collapsing and became a hospital case. We marched off on the 11th March in better weather with no wind though it was very hot. At the end of



The Dorset Yeomanry at Agagia, 26 February 1916, from the painting by Lady Butler.

four-and-a-half hours we reached a small place called Bug Bug where there were a few huts. The wells had only stinking water — quite undrinkable.

To our joy and surprise we found plenty of water wherever we dug only three feet below the surface of the sand. It was beautifully fresh although so close to the sea. We were joined here by our 18-pounder battery as well as a Sikh battery of mountain guns. These with the 2nd Regiment had caught up with the column. Our brigade of four regiments was now complete. This place figured prominently in one of Sir Winston Churchill's speeches when years later in the Second World War he referred to the troops' movements pin-pointing them on the map at the second B in Bug Bug.

The marching that day was quite terrific. At one time the 1st and 4th Regiments were marching in a wide plain parallel to each other, two-hundred yards apart and in the centre between us was a small party of guarded prisoners including the Turkish General. At one time the 4th would gradually draw ahead and then the 1st, not to be beaten, would catch up and pass the 4th who in turn would take up the challenge. A see-saw process of marching competing columns in perfect step and long loping strides took place. Each regiment of close on a thousand infantry men sweating it out. It was an experience and a sight seldom seen and never to be forgotten. We heard afterwards that the Turkish General was entranced by the sight and said he had never in his life seen such marching and such strapping soldiers. Leaving Bug Bug we were up at 4 am on

the 12th March the following day and marched off refreshed by a wonderful mug of tea provided by our cooks. We halted outside our camp till daylight at 6 o'clock before commencing our longest and most strenuous march. We reached a well after six hours' hard going where it was expected to find water. It was a scorchingly hot day and an added blow to find the well dry. However, a concession was made by relieving us of our heavy valises, these being stacked for the camel transport to collect.

The overall plan was for two infantry regiments, the 1st and 4th, to attack and take the escarpment thereby outflanking the enemy at Sollum when the remainder of the force with guns and transport would be able to advance in open country along the shore in a frontal movement. Again it was expected to find water in wells on top of the escarpment for the infantry and once more our intelligence failed for no water or wells were found. The situation until water could reach the exhausted infantry was serious. Having left our valises, we marched off on our last lap to the mountains in the far distance that never seemed to get closer. Marching in light order with haversacks only was a great help though we were all suffering from thirst and the great heat. Two hours' marching brought us to the foot of the steeply-rising range of the long escarpment. Here we had to break formation and scramble upwards amongst the rocks as best we could. The heat amongst these rocks was even worse, some men went down with sunstroke, others were almost mad with thirst. I had managed to hang on to the

last few mouthfulls of water in my bottle until then, but here I drank the lot.

Someone captured a very dirty old Arab woman on the ridge carrying a goatskin full of water. She stubbornly refused to tell us where the well was. Capt. Jenkins took the bag of water saying she must know where there was more. This smelly water was most carefully boiled and tea made. Each of us in C company, under close scrutiny, got a tablespoonful of tea. It was truly nectar. We were relieved at last by camels bringing up a small supply of water before sunset when we each had a three-quarter bottle. This day we marched twenty two miles — it seemed far more.

On again the next day on top of the ridge towards Sollum and an important pass we were told we would have to take at all costs the following day. I had been chosen for picket duty during the night and it had been a terrific strain to keep awake. Feeling very weary and thirsty I was grateful for a much shorter march that day and found a small dump of water had been transported to our halting place for the night.

On the 14th a two-and-a-half hour march took us to the pass we were to attack. To our surprise and relief we found the Senussi had evacuated their strong position and moved into the desert after blowing up their ammunition. We were content to camp where we were. Most of us ran down the mountain looking everywhere for water but without success. Once again our camel transport brought up fantasies of water and this time we had a liberal allowance and even tea for supper.

The previous day the Duke of Westminster's armoured cars followed and caught up with the enemy about twenty miles away. The cars opened fire with their machine guns and scattered the surprised enemy. To add to their discomfort two of their camels loaded with ammunition blew up with tremendous explosions from our fire. This completed their demoralisation and those not killed fled or were captured. Many prisoners were taken including Turkish officers as well as their field and machine guns.

We talked to some of the armoured car drivers later mostly with the idea of getting some water, our chaps were offering five shillings for a cup of water and some all they had. The drivers helped where they could but soon were unable to cope with the thirsty numbers and had to turn them away. However, we were given a very lucid account of their dealing with the enemy.

On the 15th after first climbing down the steep pass and forming up below we stepped out jauntily on the last lap of the march to Sollum. We felt new men after a good breakfast and quenched thirsts, soon completing our last four mile stretch to Sollum. Here in Sollum we lived under the same conditions for the next three weeks as we did at Sidi Barani. Old planks and jetsam from the bay were used for small huts usually sheltering two men. We did at least arrange them in orderly lines as in a tented camp. MacKenzie and I continued as before and got on well together.

On our first afternoon a ceremonial parade was held for the whole force. Our four infantry regiments, the cavalry and the field and mountain batteries of guns were drawn-up in lines facing the fort on the hill above where the flag was to be flown. When General Peighton and his staff rode up all sprang to attention and presented arms. The Union Jack was run up to the accompaniment of the Royal Salute of twenty-one guns. General Peighton called up all the officers and addressed them complimenting and thanking the infantry in particular for their achievements and fine marching under most difficult conditions.

During the various marches when we were usually close to the enemy forces or unsure of their whereabouts, strict precautions were taken at all halts or night bivouacs. Men were specifically warned by the higher command never to fall out but if forced to do so, always to reserve a bullet for themselves rather than risk being cut into strips by the Senussi women who were notorious for their cruel torture of any unfortunate soldier who fell into their hands. Needless to say, marching discipline was greatly enhanced by those reports.

The next evening ninety-two British crew members of two ships sunk near the coast by enemy submarines and taken prisoner by the Senussi were recaptured in a further raid deep into the desert by the Duke of Westminster. The Duke had travelled to an oasis 120 miles away with his armoured cars to where it was heard these men were kept captives. They arrived back in rags and terribly thin having had to live on snails, roots and a few dates. We heard from them that the guards had treated them fairly well and given them the same food they themselves had. Hospital clothes and treatment were awaiting them and they were overjoyed to be back.

On the 18th March a dust storm blew with gale force all day and made life miserable in our shelters which could not in any way be more than

reasonably rainproof. Clothing, food and ourselves seemed to be permeated with sand. Most fortunately every evening the wind invariably died down at sunset and gave us a break from dust in our clothes and grit in our teeth. That morning two companies (C and D) were marched off on a fatigue party carrying heavy crow bars, picks and spades and aided by an engineer squad with dynamite. There was a winding camel track up the hill to the fort or castle at the top. With five hundred men plus surveyors we commenced the making of a proper road. We worked in half-day shifts taking turnabout with the other three regiments. By the time we left Sollum three weeks later the road was complete and could be used by motor ambulances and armoured cars. The work was heavy for the mountain seemed all rock. We excavated and levered out huge rocks and blasted others out with dynamite. This was later a key road in World War II and constantly used by our troops fighting in the Western desert.

It was not long before a businesslike Greek sailed from Alexandria and set up a general store on the beach. We were now able to supplement our bully beef and army biscuits and have porridge and eggs and bacon and other luxuries for our little mess. The troops were disgusted when the vendor took advantage of our dependance on this one store and began overcharging. One of his sources of revenue was a large wooden cask of beer with the tap on the inside of his barricade. Some of our old regular army sweats drilled a hole in the cask on our side and fitted a tap. Whilst everyone engaged the salesman with much hoo-ha a steady stream of dixies was being filled out of sight below. When the barrel inexplicably ran dry the 'fat was in the fire'. The Greek, gesticulating wildly, ran round to discover the second tap, screaming insults and calling to high heaven for vengeance and redress. The upshot of it all was that our Colonel, a man with a sense of humour, ruled that we had had our fun and some the beer, so all must pay for it. Every man was deducted a portion of his pay and a goodly sum handed over to the disgruntled but now consoled vendor.

A week before leaving Sollum the 1st Regiment relieved the 2nd on top of the pass. Here we were kept busy building several block-houses to the left of the fort. This crenellated fort that looked like an old castle, must have been built very many years ago. Inside was a large courtyard and in the centre a well with a plentiful supply of beautifully fresh water. It was quite extraordinary to find water in quantity like this on top of a high range of hills.

We made full use of it and the cool courtyard was used for the sick and later for hospital cases. Several men went down with fever or food poisoning myself included, fortunately most of us for only two days. My half-section, Mac, was in a bad way. The next day twelve of us took turns in carrying him down the pass on a stretcher and into a field hospital in Sollum.

Two days later it was packed up for the last time in Sollum and we gladly marched off to board our transport ship, *HMT Scotian*. A good dinner was laid on for us aboard this comfortable and well-equipped troopship. We sailed into Alexandria harbour at midday the following day and marched to our quarters in Sidi Bish camp several miles outside of Alexandria and fortunately quite close to the sea.

To our relief new uniforms were issued to us replacing our tattered uniform for new serge outfits suitable for warfare in France.

Of great benefit to us here at Sidi Bish and all along our marching route was our close proximity to the sea which everyone made full use of. Nevertheless, often sleeping where Arabs had previously camped, lice soon made their appearance. These soldiers' pests never take long to find a home with an army on the march. We now lived in tents under more civilised conditions and were able to cleanse ourselves, discarding suspect underclothes and stocking with new.

On the 10th April 1916 the full brigade was inspected by Sir Archibald Murray, the General Officer commanding the Egyptian forces and highly complimented.

Four troopships carrying the brigade left Alexandria between the 13th and 15th April reaching Marseilles five days later. The 1st Regiment was fortunate to once more sail on the good ship *HMT Scotian* and made a comfortable trouble-free voyage.

No one was sorry to leave Egypt behind. Nevertheless, we had had three months of the finest training possible, and experience that toughened us for the more intensive fighting ahead on the Western Front. Marching and fighting in the desert had welded us four regiments into a hard-bitten battleworthy unit. A tremendous spirit of inter-regimental rivalry had developed as well as an exceptionally high morale and *esprit de corps*. We needed all of our brigade morale and the toughening experience we had undergone in the desert to fit us for inclusion in

the famous 9th Scottish Division into which we had been incorporated. The Brigade had taken a major part in the successful outcome of the task given the Western Frontier Force. The enemy had been driven from all his positions and completely routed and demoralised. The western boundary of Egypt was now secure and could be granted by

garrison troops. With this done, the British Eastern Force was able to push on with their attack on the Suez Canal followed in due course by General Allenby's brilliant campaign, which resulted in the taking of Jerusalem, the conquest of all Palestine and finally the complete defeat and surrender of the Turkish army in Palestine.